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ABSTRACT

Both marginality and moving between cultures are concepts which need to be discussed in college classes. While America and the rest of the world are becoming more multicultural through marriage, immigration, sojourn, etc., little is being done to prepare students to interact effectively with other cultures. In Milton Bennett's (1986, 1993) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, people move from being ethnocentric to being ethnorelative, each in 3 stages, based on the way they deal with cultural differences. In the first stage of the model the person is in "denial of differences." In the second stage, the person moves from denial to "defense against differences" where they perceive the differences as threatening to their own cultural identity. In the third stage, "minimization of differences," cultural differences are trivialized. The fourth stage of the model is "acceptance of differences." In the fifth stage, people are "adapting to differences" by learning alternate communication and behavioral skills to adapt to a new culture. In the sixth stage, "integration of differences," the person realizes that his/her identify comes from the process of defining themselves. In Janet Bennett's (1993) explication of encapsulated versus constructive marginals, the former is troubled by ambiguity, neither feeling at home nor having a recognized reference group, and has difficulty in decision making; and, the latter makes a conscious choice of the boundaries between cultures, has marginal reference groups, and has a sense of "dynamic in-betweenness." Combined as one model, these ideas can be used to teach students about how to cope in a multicultural world. (Contains 7 references.) (Author/CR)

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Are we caught between two or more cultures?: The importance of teaching cultural marginality in our classrooms

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Are we caught between two or more cultures?: The importance of teaching cultural marginality in our classrooms

Abstract

This paper is both a personal reflection on marginality and moving between cultures, and an attempt to outline the importance of discussing marginality in our classes. While the United States and the rest of the world is becoming more multicultural through marriage, immigration, sojourn, etc., we are doing little to prepare our students to interact effectively with other cultures. I offer Milton Bennett's (1986, 1993) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity and Janet Bennett's (1993) explication of encapsulated versus constructive marginality as one model to teach our students about how to cope in a multicultural world.

Are we caught between two or more cultures?: The importance of teaching cultural marginality in our classrooms

"i am caught between two rooms
swinging from one to another.
grasping moments as the wind
sways me from the first to the next.
living, loving, caressing life in each
taking a little from one
and giving to the other, and back.

i hear the strains of my mother's voice
over the aroma of the eggplant curry
wafting over my father's intense study
of the Indian Express - his favorite newspaper.
the aunts and uncles came in droves
to my sister's wedding to eat
and gossip during the ceremony,
and through the night.
glimpses of life .. very Indian.

in the other room, the surround sound
heard Simon and Garfunkel over troubled waters,
while Pink Floyd cried about the walls in our lives.
Simpsons and Butterfinger were definitely in
as Gore and Quayle babbled using innocuous verbiage.
the computer was never shut off
as reams of paper saw term papers
discuss new ways to communicate.
glimpses of life .. very American.

between these two worlds
i am happy, confused, angry
and in pain - all at the same time.
for I am a door
caught between two rooms.
i see and feel both of them
but I don't seem to belong to either."

Nagesh Rao, October 1992

I wrote this poem in 1992 after having lived in the United States for five years. At that time, I felt "marginal" between being Indian and being an American, and also felt "caught" between these two cultures. Today, I no longer feel caught between these cultures, but have the ability to "flow" between these cultures. The purpose of this paper is to show that students here in the United States need to understand that their country and the world around them is becoming more multicultural, and with increasing number of people realizing that they move between two or more cultures.

In a meeting of intercultural scholars recently, Carlos Cortés, a renowned Professor of History from University of California, Riverside, summed up our changing multicultural world by quoting an old Arabic proverb: "The dog barks, but the caravan moves on." While some people continue to show discontentment at multiculturalism, our "caravan," or the world around us is becoming increasingly multicultural, whether we like it or not. The thesis of this paper is: (1) to make students aware of their own marginality, and (2) teach them skills such that they do not feel "caught" between cultures, but are able to "flow" between cultures. I am drawing largely on work done by Milton Bennett (1993) on his developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, and Janet Bennett's (1993) explication of encapsulated ("caught" between two or more cultures) versus constructive ("flow" between two or more cultures) marginality.

Cultural Marginality

I came to the United States in 1987 to join a Master's program in Communication at the University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, small town of 40,000 people, about 90 miles north of New Orleans. I accepted their invitation to join the program for three reasons: (1) My

cousin Ramesh had just completed a Masters in the same department, and had told me wonderful things about the program, (2) I knew, therefore, that I would be entering a community of Indian students who knew about me, and would take care of me, and (3) This was the only program that indicated that I may get a scholarship in the second semester.

Since I had travelled so far from India to a new culture, I decided I would make the most of my stay in the United States by participating in as many aspects of this culture as possible. So, I went to a colleague's place for a traditional thanksgiving dinner, ate turkey and pecan pie, travelled several times to Bourbon street in New Orleans and stayed in to the wee hours of the morning drinking coffee at the Cafe du Monde before returning to Hattiesburg. In a year or so, I noticed something distinct. My Indian friends stopped calling me for dinner. They had invited me over several times, and clearly, I had not reciprocated often. Soon, I heard rumblings from my Indian friends that I had "sold out" to the American culture. On the other hand, my American friends revelled at the speed at which I was learning about their culture. I mimicked the Southern accent with conviction, started using American colloquial terms with ease ("Hi, what's up?" and "I appreciate all your help" being some of them), played golf (golf is seen as a very elitist game in India, and not affordable to the middle class), and kept up with all the local and national news. When my Americans friends said,"You are so Americanized!," I would beam with pleasure.

A couple of years later, I missed many parts of my Indian culture, and tried to reenter the Indian community, but to no avail. I had been gone for too long. On the other hand, the compliments about being "Americanized" no longer sounded like a compliment. It did feel like I

had "sold out" on my Indianness. It was around this time that I wrote the poem, "i am a door," and started talking about my feelings of being caught with anybody who would listen. A few of my Indian colleagues did not feel any such thing -- they were clearly leading an Indian experience in an American culture. They shared rooms with other Indians, ate Indian food, listened to *Hindi* movie music, and constantly talked of their life back home. Occasionally, I would find another international student who felt like I did. Americans who had travelled abroad sympathesized with me, but it was clear that there was a difference in the intensity of the feelings. I constantly wondered, "What makes some of us adapt and assimilate to new cultures better than some of us who are not capable and/or are not willing to adapt to new cultures?" Then I met Milton and Janet Benett, the directors of the Intercultural Communication Institute, Portland, Oregon, and I found one very persuasive answer.

Before I talk about the answer I got from the Bennetts, I want to emphasize that I did not write this paper to just narrate my life experiences being a marginal person. I think that as educators, we are all dealing with students who realize that they live in a multicultural world, but have no tools to cope with it. On the other hand, there are many students who do not realize the changing face our world. Janet Bennett (1993) argues that looking around the United States in the 1990s, we see ample evidence of multicultural people whether it is through immigration, sojourning, marriage, adoption, or birth. For example, children of bicultural marriages may develop a third culture perspective by integrating the cultures of both parents. Members of "minority" groups frequently have to internalize two or more cultures to function effectively in the dominant and minority cultures. Janet Bennett (1993) explains that there are also "invisible

minorities," including gays, bisexuals, incest survivors etc., who also face similar challenges. Their cultural differences may be hidden, but most of them consider themselves to be a part of at least two cultures. Janet Bennett (1993) cites Park who sums it appropriately:

> ... a cultural hybrid, a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples; never quite willing to break, even if he were permitted to do so, with his past and his traditions, and not quite accepted...in the new society in which he now sought to find a place. He was a man on the margin of two cultures and two societies which never completely interpenetrated and fused (Park, 1928, p. 892).

I do not believe that my personal experience is an exception. Most of our students move between two or more cultures; some are aware of these movements and enjoy them immensely, and there are others who are aware but deal with cultural differences less positively. I now turn to Milton Bennett's Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1986) that explains why different people react differently to intercultural differences.

Milton Bennett's (1986) Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

I offer a brief overview of Milton Bennett's (1986) model of intercultural sensitivity as one model for how people deal with cultural differences. Milton Bennett (1986) argues that intercultural sensitivity is not an innate and natural process. He offers a developmental model arguing that human beings learn to be interculturally sensitive by the way they construct cultural differences around them. It is a phenomological approach in that the focus is on how people attach meanings to phenomena around them. In his model, people move from being ethnocentric (3 stages) to being ethnorelative (3 stages) based on the way they deal with cultural differences.

Milton Bennett (1993) defines ethnocentrism as "assuming that the world view of one's own culture is central to al reality" (p. 30). In the first stage of the model, the person is in "denial of differences." In this stage, the person denies the existence of all cultural diversity, and if confronted, may agree that it exists elsewhere but not where s/he lives. Milton Bennett (1993) explains that "while this pure form of ethnocentrism might seem rare in a heterogeneous and intercommunicating world, semblances of the position can be maintained through either the isolation of physical circumstance or by the separation created by intentional physical and social barriers" (p.30). People in denial have a few and broad categories for cultural differences, and are generally benign. For example, when people ask me if Indians ride on elephants to work, these are well-meaning but uninformed people. Similarly, I learned a lot about physical and social barriers when I learned that it is appropriate to call ahead and get permission before you visit someone in the United States. In India, it was common for people to drop in without notice. I do not believe that people with telephones, answering machines, and security systems in their homes are in denial of cultural differences, but they have the choice to selectively filter out cultural differences.

In the second stage, the person moves from denial to "defense against differences," where they perceive the differences as threatening to their own cultural reality. People in defense, by accepting the existence of cultural differences, represent a development in sensitivity beyond denial. However, people in defense generally see their own culture as superior and denigrate other cultures. There is an exception to this situation in that some people move to and completely buy in to a new culture, and criticize their own culture negatively. Milton Bennett

(1986) calls this process "reversal." In this stage, the people are no longer benign, but potentially dangerous (for example, the Ku Klux Klan).

The third and last stage of ethnocentrism is "minimization of differences." People in this stage have learned a lot more about other cultures and don't evaluate it negatively, but cultural differences are trivialized. This is when people acknowledge that people in other cultures eat different foods, wear different clothes, listen to music different from theirs, but argue that we are all human beings and we are all the same! Milton Bennett (1993) explains that this is still an ethnocentric position because when people say, "we are all the same," they are actually saying, "we are all the same, and we are like me."

Milton Bennett (1986) argues that people have to go through a "paradigmatic" divide between the ethnocentric and ethnorelative stages. Each person has to move from a dualistic view of their own life to a more nonabsolute view of reality and cultures around them. The key assumption of the ethnorelative stages is that cultures can only be understood in relation to one another. There is not one "right" culture. "Acceptance of differences" is the fourth stage of this model (the first of the ethnorelative stages) where cultural differences are accepted and acknowledged. Differing world views is seen as normal and acceptable. Milton Bennett (1993) argues that behavioral differences of other cultures (language, food, clothes) are accepted before value differences (alternate beliefs about the phenomena being observed) are accepted. Compared to the previous stages, people are learning more about other cultures.

In the fifth stage, people are "adapting to differences" by learning alternate communication and behavioral skills to adapt to the new culture. One can no longer assume that

common meanings for certain behaviors among people of one culture will be understood similarly in other cultures. Milton Bennett (1986) argues that learning new and different communication skills is an additive process and not a substitutive process. Integrity of one's own cultural perspective need not be hampered or lost by learning new cultural skills.

The sixth stage of Milton's model is "integration of differences." In the adaptation stage, the person looks at the world in pluralistic terms and learns the communication skills of other cultures. In the integration stage, the person is attempting to integrate the "disparate aspects of one's identity into a new whole while remaining culturally marginal" (Milton Bennett, 1993, p. 60). The integrated person realizes that his/her identity comes from process of defining themselves. In my poem, I was consciously defining my identity and the struggle I faced trying to merge the identity of two cultures. Janet Bennett (1993) explores the identity issues in the integration stage by defining two types of marginality.

Encapsulated versus Constructive Marginality

Janet Bennett (1993) explains that any person who has internalized two or more cultural frames of reference faces an internal culture shock of trying to integrate these cultural frames. Most people deal with this internal culture shock in one of two ways. If the marginal[1] person feels trapped or caught between two or more cultures, and is unable to construe a sense of reality

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[1] I, like Janet Bennett, do not see the word "marginal" as a negative term, but more as a term describing a person who is the periphery of two or more cultures. I would go as far as to argue that in this increasing interaction between cultures, only marginal people can play a positive role as "bridges between cultures." And like bridges, while they perform the important function of connecting two land masses, they are also most at risk when the two cultures being connected are at war.

that is comfortable, such a person is an encapsulated marginal. Janet Bennett (1993) explains that an encapsulated marginal is troubled by ambiguity, never feels at "home," has no recognized reference group, has difficulty in decision making, is self-absorbed, and conscious of self.

In contrast, if the marginal person makes a conscious choice of the boundaries s/he wishes to keep between cultures, s/he may be a constructive marginal. A constructive marginal is never not "at home," makes conscious choices from each culture after understanding the implications of these choices, has marginal reference groups, has good sense of boundaries, and has a sense of "dynamic in-betweenness" (this last term is defined by Yoshikawa, 1987).

Educating Students About Cultural Marginality

Most of us would probably agree the importance of teaching our students about cultural marginality. Teaching about cultural marginality, however, is a challenging task given that students' reality who are not at the integration stage have no categories to empathize with those students who are integrating two or more cultures. I offer one model of discussing cultural marginality in classes, and am constantly looking for more creative and effective ways to teach this sensitive topic. Like Janet Bennett, I borrow Nevitt Sanford's (1966) framework which combines challenge and support to educate our students. This combination of challenge and support is important because if we support too much, the students will be bored, but if we challenge them too much, they will run away from the learning experience. It is an important but delicate balance to maintain between challenge and support. Since I do not know which stage of Milton Bennett's model the student is at, I take them through the different stages of Milton

Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity conceptually and experientially[3]. I am primarily talking about students in my 300 level undergraduate intercultural communication class. In almost all cases, students rarely deny the existence of other cultural perspectives. Through a variety of games, I raise their consciousness to show how they belong to at least five or more cultures (ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic status, and education being the most common cultures). To move students from the defense stage to later stages, we discuss the important role of peer and support groups to maintain one's own cultural identity. Then, I challenge them to think about other cultural perspectives by discussing Kolb's (1976) Learning Style Inventory to show our differing learning styles. We then spend a fair amount of time discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each learning style. To move people further along from the minimization stage, we have a potluck dinner to support the notion that there are differences among cultures. Students then discuss if these differences are limited to food, clothing, etc. or if they go deeper in to the values and beliefs of different cultures.

For those students who accept other cultural perspectives as viable alternatives, I bring international students from different countries to teach us a variety of verbal and nonverbal communication skills to adapt to their culture. We start discussing the positive and not so positive implications of adapting to new cultures. I bring several people to class who I see being at the integration stage to discuss their life experiences being a marginal person. For example, one group included a global nomad (an American citizen who had lived in six different countries

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[3] Milton Bennett and Mitch Hammer are presently creating scales to assess participants' level of intercultural sensitivity.

with her parents as she was growing up, and was now back in the U.S.), an international student from Nigeria who had lived in the United States for five years, a bisexual man, a woman who saw herself caught between a traditional family structure where she was expected to play her "housewife" role and as a senior executive for a marketing firm, where she was expected to behave more like her male counterparts. In a panel format, each panelist narrated their experiences for about ten minutes, and after all the presenters were done, the students asked questions of these panelists for about an hour. In a debrief session at the end, the students synthesize the various facets of marginality. One important lesson they learn is that the move from an encapsulated to a constructive stage happens only by a conscious choice of each person to make that move, understanding the implications of that shift. For example, a Tanzanian colleague of mine explained:

> "I choose to wear western clothes because it is appropriate and more comfortable here in the U.S. Linguistically, I borrow local idioms and metaphors to get my point across more efficiently and effectively. I also choose to visit the mosque every Friday with my friends from Tanzania, and spend Sunday with my grandmother to learn about her life back in Tanzania. I know that I am bringing my grandmother's tales to my students in class, and take my students' stories back to my children."
>
> (Personal conversation with a Tanzanian colleague, 1995)

None of these exercises and discussions that I use in class guarantee that students will move from one stage of intercultural sensitivity to the next. There is a need to develop indicators to assess movement through these stages. At best, these exercises in class raise students' consciousness of

different stages, and provide them a few tools to assess where they might fall. Borrowing the old Arabic proverb once again, I hope that these lessons will reducing the barking at our multicultural world.

From several evaluation sessions, students appreciate knowing Milton Bennett's model as one tool to assess intercultural sensitivity. We discuss the strengths and limitations of a developmental model. Clearly, not everybody progresses through stages in a linear and hierarchical fashion. Intercultural sensitivity may not a trait in that once we integrate two or more cultures, we are our sensitive to all other cultures. Because of war, economic pressures, and other factors, constructive marginals can move back to the defensive stage with little resistance. Teaching multiculturalism and being interculturally sensitive cannot be taught easily, but we need to offer our students life experiences and relevant frameworks to make it possible for them to be better world citizens. I would like all our students to be a "door that flows between two rooms with joy and vigor."

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